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ABSTRACT

In children's realistic stories about animals a number of wholly and unambiguously anthropocentric assumptions are at work. For instance, in a study most of the books (81%) in one sampling of 50 stories involve a pet or the process of domesticating a wild animal. In most cases the primary animal character is a dog or horse. The predominance of pets and pet keeping helps to create and perpetuate anthropocentrism in a variety of ways. First, while pets receive a favored status, "other" animals are relegated to the background and treated indiscriminately as objects or replaceable commodities. "National Velvet" is an interesting example because Velvet's love for her horse is casually juxtaposed throughout the story to her father's occupation as a butcher. Second, the idea of a good pet or animal is measured in these children's stories by his or her subservience to humans. Finally, pet stories delimit the meaning of the bond humans have with animals. These stories send the message that pet keeping is the only relationship that humans have with animals that is important. Also, the genre of animal stories often centers on the theme of growing up. In this theme children must discard their annual connections in order to take their rightful place in the world of grown-ups. The content of these stories is important because it teaches children how adults in their culture expect them to think about and treat animals. Because of the anthropocentric assumptions and messages in texts are regularly produced but not often questioned, they win a kind of familiarity and credibility. In order to secure an accurate picture of the task involved in eliminating this form of prejudice, we must consider the many and varied ways that this prejudice is defined and reinforced. (TB)

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"Engendering Anthropocentrism: Lessons from Children's Realistic Animal Stories"

By Kathleen R. Johnson, presented at the Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association Meetings, April 12, 1995, Philadelphia, PA.

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Daniel Quinn recently wrote a novel in which a man and a gorilla named Ishmael embark on an intellectual adventure that redefines humanity and the role of our species on this planet. As the novel unfolds, we become increasingly aware of the importance of myth or story in our culture. Of particular importance to Quinn is our creation myth -- the story our culture tells to explain how the world and its inhabitants came to be. As Quinn points out, this myth is anthropocentric precisely because it contains as a premise the notion that humans are the center of the universe and that the world was made for us.

Most interesting about Quinn's novel is the notion that this cultural myth has found a permanence in our very consciousness which holds us captive not only in terms of our cognitive world but in terms of the very way we experience the physical world. Through the voice of Ishmael, the gorilla, the author remarks:

> There's nothing fundamentally wrong with people. Given a story to enact that puts them in accord with the world, they will live in accord with the world. But given a story to enact that puts them at odds with the world, as yours does, they will live at odds with the world. Given a story to enact in which they are the lords of the world, they will act like lords of the world. And, given a story to enact in which the world is a foe to be conquered, they will conquer it like a foe, and one day, inevitably, their foe will lie bleeding to death at their feet, as the world is now.[1]

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To locate the destructive effects of this myth we need only look at our everyday lives, as we distance and alienate ourselves more completely and irrevocably from other animals. I argue that as part of our culture, much of animal realism in children's literature functions as a basis for sustaining this myth of human superiority.

For some, this may seem wildly off the mark because many of these stories evoke compassion and a sensitivity for the plight of other animals. I'm talking about a genre that includes such stories as *My Friend Flicka, Gentle Ben, National Velvet, Big Red, The Wolfling,* and *Lassie.*

So, let me say at the outset that I am not arguing that the narratives are wholly or unambiguously anthropocentric. We find that textual representations of the real world contain gaps, contradictions, and inconsistencies. As Gina Marchetti notes, we can think of narratives as "windows" that stare into society's most "deeply disturbing ideological contradictions."

In designing a method to analyze this genre, I could not adopt a straight-forward structural approach. Children's realistic animal stories are simply not as structured or formulaic as folktales, romance novels or westerns. Arthur Berger suggests that with such genres we need to look for the rules and codes which are familiar to both a genre's producers and consumers. Conventions, as Berger calls them, are defining features of a genre that shape our interpretations of a story by defining the issues and creating limits. Because they act as a "frame" for ideological content, conventions are capable of making some messages and meanings more likely than others. By using

this concept of convention and then situating the texts as objects within the anthropocentric culture in which they arise, I was able to identify those aspects of animal realism that engender anthropocentrism.

I find a number of anthropocentric conventions prominent within children's realistic animal stories. Due to time limitations, I will briefly discuss how two of these conventions shape the possibilities for the narratives and construct cultural meaning. Let me begin with the theme of petkeeping.

Most of the books (81%) within my sample of 50 stories involve a pet or the process of domesticating a wild mammal. In most cases the primary animal character is a dog or horse. The predominance of pets and petkeeping helps to create and perpetuate anthropocentrism in a variety of ways.

First, while pets receive a favored status, *other* animals are relegated to the background and treated indiscriminately as objects or replaceable commodities. *National Velvet* is an interesting example, because Velvet's love for her horse is casually juxtaposed throughout the story to her father's occupation as a butcher. Such stories can arouse our concern for certain categories of animals -- in particular, those animals which we already feel a bonding and kinship -- but they have little power when the issue concerns domesticated farm animals or those animals we consider to be "pests" or "wild."

Admittedly, pet animals receive a certain degree of attention and respect, but the language and choice of words some authors use to refer to other animals reflect the view that all animals are generally

subordinate to humans. Some stories, for example, refer to animals as "livestock"; and the common practice of referring to an animal as "it" further objectifies that animal and by association all animals.

The stories also illustrate the object status of our pets through the buying and selling of these animals or in the way they depict a child longing more than anything to "own" another animal. Second, we find the idea that a "good" animal or pet is measured by his or her utility for and subservience to humans. More specifically, a number of stories suggests that canine loyalty and obedience are the quintessential traits for a pet animal. These stories contain child characters who yearn for a dog, or at least the devotion that a dog represents. Consider in this light the following passage from *Gentle Ben* where Mark pines for a pet bear:

> 'If you were mine I'd feed you up until you were as round as a seal. You'd grow and grow until you were the biggest bear in the whole world, I bet. And I'd train you to walk right behind me all the time. In the summer we could go down to the dock and watch the cruise ships come in, and the people would 'Oh' and 'Ah!' at us, and take pictures. And you'd follow me around like a dog--'....I bet I'd be the only kid in the whole world who had a bear for a pet. Gee!'.[2]

What I argue is that such seemingly benign reflections camouflage the means by which animals must conform to our idea of the perfect pet. In the process of breaking and training, we often subordinate the animal's individuality to our needs and desires. By considering his pet animal as a thing -- or plaything -- Mark establishes an underlying power and inequality between him and his bear.

Lastly, and probably most generally, the genre's characteristic emphasis on pets and our relationship with them delimits the arena in which the reader can negotiate the meaning of the bond humans have

with other animals. This emphasis sends an implicit message that petkeeping is *the* relationship with other animals of worth or importance. This emphasis may seem innocuous until we consider how the concept of "pet" itself ties us not only practically but cognitively to an anthropocentric society, leading us to fixate on the reduction of (certain) animals to pets. Through this process we develop an inclination to define the interests of other animals in the reduced form constrained by the institution of petkeeping.

George Bernard Shaw captures this point in his essay entitled "The Womanly Woman." Here he writes:

> If we have come to think that the nursery and the kitchen are the natural sphere of women, we have done so exactly as English children come to think that a cage is the natural sphere of a parrot -- because they have never seen one anywhere else.[3]

While Shaw's primary interest was, no doubt, the advancement of women's rights, this should not eclipse the case he simultaneously makes for other animals.

Clearly, narrative is only one means by which children learn to define their relationship with other animals. But these lessons combine with other cultural forms such as comics, cartoons, commercials, and Disney movies to furnish additional support for human superiority.

Another convention of the genre that I argue engenders anthropocentrism is the association or bond between children and animals. Seventy-five percent of the stories I sampled depict a child having the closest relationship with the primary animal character. This compares to 12% of the stories that depict an adult bonding with the animal. Simply by delimiting the group of human characters who relate with animals, the genre sends an implicit message that children

compared to adults have a stronger connection to other animals and nature in general.

The genre brings out the anthropocentric implications of this association through another very prominent theme, the theme of maturation. In this theme children must discard their animal connections in order to take their rightful place in the world of grown-ups. This often involves a child's physical and emotional separation from their pet animals as well as their adoption of an instrumental view of animals in general. It is through the development of this child/animal connection -- and subsequent disconnection -- that supremacy over other animals receives a key role in human adult development.

The Yearling is an illustrative case. After his parents force him to kill his pet fawn, Jody runs away from home to wrestle with the death in isolation. Upon returning, Jody's father remarks on a lesson well learned: "You've done come back different. You've taken a punishment. You ain't a yearlin' no longer...."[4] In this case the killing of the fawn symbolizes Jody's adult status.

A 1985 study on attitudes toward other animals finds that in contrast to children adults do indeed adopt a more utilitarian view of animals. I asked myself how we learn to adopt and then make sense of such a view. And, of course, how do the stories reflect or possibly contribute to this view?

To help answer these questions I referred to an essay by Gresham Sykes and David Matza in which they identify a number of devices commonly used by juvenile delinquents to justify or rationalize their

acts of deviance. The authors call these devices "techniques of neutralization."[5] What amazed me were the close parallels between these devices and the rationalizations that some of the child characters are asked to adopt on their path out of childhood and into adulthood. I locate several of these techniques within the stories and identify their connection to a selective tradition that supports and is supported by an anthropocentric ideology. Again, due to time constraints I will give examples of only two of these techniques.

The first technique is characterized by an *appeal to the inevitable* and involves the idea that an animal's destruction must be accepted quietly and privately -- in general, as an inevitable fact of life -- and more specifically, as a mark of one's passage into adulthood. This is clearly reflected in *The Yearling,* a quote from which I read a moment ago in which the boy runs away from home to deal with the death of his pet fawn.

The second of Sykes and Matza's techniques that I have identified and will mention here centers on a *denial of injury or harm* that we inflict on other animals. Sometimes we pretend that animals feel no pain. In *Smoky the Cowhorse,* the branding of Smoky the horse did not hurt but "felt cool," and the "searing iron was no worse than a touch from the human hand." Accordingly, it is not only necessary but harmless to tame wild animals. The author Will James writes that:

> To them that *only* sees a wild horse roped and rode and don't know the insides of the game, horse breaking might seem a little rough; but I'm here to say that it's not near as rough as it is necessary, and in the long run it's the rider that gets treated the roughest.[6]

Although some stories portray the violence against or death of an

animal as tragic, few stories in the end reject the event or question its necessity. While these techniques of neutralization do not appear as a distinct aspect of the story's structure, they do function as part of a story's content that rationalizes human practices and leaves the structure of domination and control intact. As such they are powerful reinforcers of socialization. The broad message offered to the child reader is that the animal's death is inevitable, unchangeable, and an irresistible part of growing up.

Of course, these stories are fictional accounts in the strict sense, but as a form of realism they model human experience and therefore contain in their meanings the classifications, the interpretations, and the inconsistencies that a particular society imposes on the young reader's understanding of the world. I have uncovered a number of anthropocentric assumptions in the frame of the narratives (that is, in the genre's conventions) as well as in the progress and resolution of narrative content (that is, in the techniques of neutralization discussed earlier). I argue that children's realistic animal stories function as an important site for the production of ideological meaning. Because the anthropocentric assumptions and messages in the texts are regularly produced but not often questioned, they win a kind of familiarity and credibility. This suggests that in order to secure an accurate picture of the task involved in eliminating this form of prejudice, and in creating and securing a *new* and more *inspiring* vision of the world and of ourselves, we must consider the many and varied ways that this prejudice is defined and reinforced.

Endnotes

1.Quinn, Daniel. *Ishmael*. New York: Bantam. 1993, p. 84.

2.Morey, Walt. 1965. *Gentle Ben*. New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc, p. 16.

3.Quoted in Roszak, Betty and Theodore Roszak. 1969. *Masculine/Feminine: Readings in Sexual Mythology and the Liberation of Women*. New York: Harper and Row, p. 60.

4.Rawlings, Marjorie Kinnan. 1938. *The Yearling*. New York: Collier MacMillan Publishers, p. 428.

5.Sykes, Gresham M. and David Matza. 1957. "Techniques of Neutralization: A Theory of Delinquency." *American Sociological Review*. Volume 22 (6).

6.James, Will. 1926. *Smoky the Cow Horse*. New York: Aladdin Books. p. 39.